

Times and
Democrat
Orangeburg, SC
Circ. 20345
From Page:
2
3/18/2010
67030



145 PROFILE IN LIVING ~ SGT. DAVID BECKHAM



Sgt. David Beckham, left, of the S.C. National Guard receives a state commendation and state ribbons from Brig. Gen. David Shuler. In his early years in the Guard, he worked primarily with the 251st Medical Company in St. Matthews.

SPECIAL TO THE T&D

'Voice of the Guard'

Man who helped troops find their way back home now facing his own battle

By **AMY MORRIS**
Special To The T&D

He is known officially as "The Voice of the South Carolina Army National Guard."

His voice is recognizable to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But he's no longer answering the phone at the Adjutant General's office.

After more than 50 years in the South Carolina Army National Guard, Sgt. Maj. David Beckham has called it quits. This will be the second time he's retired from the Guard.

Beckham spent much of his time in the National Guard as a recruiter. He worked primarily with the 251st Medical Company in St. Matthews. When time came to retire, he wasn't quite ready to say good-bye. He traded in his camouflage for a coat and tie, and took a seat at the front desk in the "TAG" building in Columbia, which houses the headquarters for the S.C. Military Department. Sgt. Beckham answered phones and directed calls to where they needed to go.

Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., also served in the National Guard, and remembers

Beckham's role in the office.

"He is an institution and a person who is known for his deep appreciation and affection for the troops. He is always a positive person. I can remember that any time you would enter the TAG building there would be a warm welcome, and it was genuine. I knew of his reputation of being so thoughtful, working specifically with soldiers and their families. My son (Maj. Alan Wilson) has worked with him over the years. So, our family has developed a great appreciation for Sgt. Beckham's service."

It was Maj. Alan Wilson who approached his father about recognizing Beckham on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

"I was contacted by my son, and we initiated a Certificate of Appreciation on behalf of the House of Representatives. It is limited to whom you can give the recognition. It was clear Sgt. Beckham fit all the criteria," Rep. Wilson said. "I'm so grateful that we were able to present it to him. He is so well-deserving. His devotion to our individual soldiers and their families is so clear."

The national honor comes not because Beckham served more than a half-century in the military. He actu-

County:

Orangeburg

67030-03-18_2001





Times and
Democrat
Orangeburg, SC
Circ. 20345
From Page:
2
3/18/2010
67030

ally started a new program at the South Carolina Military Department that has helped all troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas where there isn't fighting, but where troops are stationed overseas.

Beckham began his military career in 1957, and retired — the first time — in 1998.

He couldn't sit still, and started a whole new military career handling the incoming calls for the Military Department of South Carolina. Soon after, he realized the importance of his role.

Two young Marines in South Korea were trying to call their families through the military switchboard in Beaufort to let them know they'd arrived safely. But the calls weren't going through, and their calling cards weren't working. As a last-ditch effort, they called the S.C. Military Department.

Beckham answered the phone. He knew how to route the calls through, and helped those Marines reach their families.

After 9/11 happened, things changed. Beckham became an advocate for ensuring all of the military installations in the state were able to help military personnel reach their loved ones from overseas.

His positive attitude helped Beckham create a bond with thousands of military men and women all over the world, all by phone.

That's why they call him "The Voice of the S.C. National Guard."

Today, Beckham has a new battle.

He had only been retired a few months when he stumbled and fell one morning as he was walking through the couple's condo in Myrtle Beach. Concerned, his wife, Catherine, took him to the emer-

gency room. Doctors found a spot in Beckham's brain during an MRI. A neurosurgeon was called in, and determined the spot was an abscess.

"It was actually the best of all worlds," the doctor said later. "It could've been a lot worse. But there is a long road ahead."

In removing the abscess, the surgeon had to be very careful not to damage any surrounding brain tissue. He warned the Beckham family that David might lose his speech and maybe some motor function.

It seemed like a bitter irony. The man dubbed "The Voice of the South Carolina National Guard" might lose his ability to talk. He is known for his booming, gregarious voice, once described as "James Earl Jones with a Southern accent." Men and women overseas say when they call the S.C. Military Department and hear that voice, they know they've reached home.

The surgery lasted nearly three hours. No complications, said the neurosurgeon, but the long road to recovery was just beginning.

Anyone who knows him — and many people in Calhoun and Orangeburg counties do — knows Beckham is a fighter.

Today he is recuperating in Myrtle Beach. He has to go through physical therapy, work on his speech and take a lot of medication to make sure no more infections invade his body.

After years of helping troops on the front lines of battle find their way home, now he's fighting a battle of his own. He wants to go home, too.

■ Amy Morris is an award-winning reporter in Washington, D.C., and is David Beckham's daughter.